

## Environmental journalism viewed from Canada

Shane Gunster

*Rolling the calendar back a year to early 2008 and surveying the Canadian media from that vantage point, one could be forgiven a cautious sense of optimism that the pervasive neglect of environmental issues and concerns was finally coming to an end.*

Spurred on by the surprising success of Al Gore's 2006 blockbuster, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and the subsequent highly publicized release of the latest batch of working group reports from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in 2007 Canadian newspapers devoted more attention to global warming than ever before (Weaver 2008: 31). Global warming was galvanizing greater interest and attention in environmental issues than had been seen for decades.

More important than the sheer volume of stories was a noticeable shift in the tone and content of the coverage away from controversies over the legitimacy of climate science towards an acceptance of its anthropogenic basis, the likely severity of its effects and the pressing need to substantially reduce greenhouse gases. While the views of so-called 'deniers' continued to crop up in letters to the editor and, far more rarely, the op-ed columns of Canadian newspapers (especially the politically conservative daily *The National Post*), they were no longer represented within 'hard news' stories about climate science.

Moreover, investigative reports by Canadian journalists – including a damning November 2006 documentary entitled *The Denial Machine* by the CBC's The Fifth Estate – played a critical role in educating the public about a coordinated campaign by some corporations and politicians to misrepresent climate science as uncertain in order to prevent and delay government action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Superb internet resources such as *De Smog Blog*, founded by a Vancouver-based public relations expert who was frustrated by his industry's complicity in this campaign, continue to expose and illuminate corporate and government spin on this topic.

By 2008, the framing of climate change in the Canadian media had decisively shifted from an issue of science to an issue of politics, policy and lifestyle. The principal questions were no longer is global warming real or will it have a significant (and negative) impact upon the planet, but rather what could Canadians do, both individually and collectively, to minimize the possibility of climate change. In political terms, news coverage focused upon issues such as whether or not Canada could (or should) meet its commitments under the Kyoto Accord, the Conservative government's April 2007 climate change framework which emphasized intensity-based rather than fixed targets for reducing emissions and, most recently, former Liberal leader Stephane Dion's proposal to shift taxation away from income towards carbon.

### Greening lifestyles

Beyond the sphere of politics and public policy, Canadians received a steady flow of environmental advice about how to 'green' their lifestyles and reduce their carbon footprint. From changing light-bulbs to taking mass transit to eating locally grown and produced food, the many paths to environmental sustainability (and a guilt-free conscience) were mapped out in virtually all media genres and forms. An avalanche of green marketing invited Canadians to change the world through shopping and assured them that corporate giants like Walmart, General Electric and Ford were doing their part to make business practices more environmentally friendly and develop new forms of green technology.

Notwithstanding the many shortcomings and deficiencies in this type of coverage, including most notably an over-emphasis upon lifestyle change vs more fundamental economic and political transformation, the sheer volume of reporting on environmental issues clearly played a positive

role in carving out a space for the environment as a political priority for Canadians and their politicians. Between 2006 and early 2008, the environment was confirmed in survey after survey as one of the top two or three concerns of the public. Increased media coverage played no small role in both reflecting and generating the much greater attention paid to the enormity of the ecological challenges we face.

Eight months into the meltdown of financial markets and in the midst of a deepening global economic recession, the prospects for environmental journalism today in Canada appear much bleaker. Given the widespread and often catastrophic impact of the economic crisis, the rapid displacement of the environment by the economy in the headlines is entirely understandable. More troublesome, though, is the complete failure of the media to reflect upon the possibility that ‘fixing’ the crisis might involve something more creative than simply stimulating a return to unsustainable levels of consumption and economic growth. What about exploring a fundamentally different vision of what constitutes a healthy economy based upon criteria such as sustainability or the capacity to satisfy real human needs?

Simply put, the over consumption of resources is killing the planet in more ways than any one of us can keep track of, yet the prevailing mantra for ending the recession is how can we get people to ratchet *up* their consumption. Our collective inability to grapple with or even recognize this basic contradiction provides alarming confirmation of the depressingly cynical axiom that public sympathy for the environment is perversely dependent upon a booming economy and high levels of material consumption. Canadian media’s failure to register this impasse, or even reflect upon the speed at which their own recent focus upon environmental concerns has been largely displaced by a manic obsession to get the cash registers ringing again, does not augur well for environmental journalism in the future.

Condemning the media for its refusal to brood upon the existential contradiction of our age – the health of the economy (narrowly defined) vs the health of the planet – may be asking too much. Real gains have been made over the last decade and a more modest accounting of how environmental journalism in Canada might build upon these is an important exercise in this context.

In an insightful op-ed piece recently published in Canada’s highest circulation daily, *The Toronto Star*, Momoko Price argues that while we may have moved beyond the first stage of climate change denial in accepting the science, the second stage of denial is in full swing. Price quotes George Marshall, a climate activist from the United Kingdom: ‘The real denial, the definition of denial, is the disconnect between what you know and what you do. In other words, denial isn’t not knowing something; denial is much more knowing something but not letting that in any way affect what you do’ (Price, ‘The missing pieces’, p. IN1).

Raising awareness about this latent form of denial as well as the many different ways of closing the gap between knowledge and action will be the most important task for environmental journalism in the years to come.

### **Surreal disjuncture**

Climate change science is pretty clear on two fundamental points. First, global warming must not be allowed to exceed 2 degrees Celsius, not only due to the catastrophic effects this level of warming will bring but also because crossing this threshold triggers natural feedback mechanisms which will then make much higher levels of warming unavoidable. Second, global greenhouse gas emissions must be cut by 80% by 2050 in order to give us a reasonable chance of achieving this objective.

Given the present and past geographic distribution of those emissions, the target cuts for industrialized countries are between 90% and 95%. From a scientific perspective, these are absolute, non-negotiable, all-or-nothing targets. Partial measures will, ultimately, have little to

no effect on climate change. If we do not meet these targets, we will condemn future generations to a magnitude of ecological privation and human suffering beyond what any of us can imagine. These basic, indisputable facts must come to inform both the media and the public's sense of the urgency and gravity of the situation.

The most glaring deficiency in the discussion of the environment in the media today lies in the surreal disjuncture between terrifying warnings of climactic apocalypse and the accompanying anemic and often banal recommendations for individualized lifestyle change. If the crisis is as bad as the scientists are saying (and more and more of us are coming to that conclusion), why are we not doing more to address it? Why has our institutional and political response been so weak and ineffectual?

Doug McKenzie-Mohr, a Canadian environmental psychologist, argues that the most important element in fostering sustainable forms of behaviour is the identification and dismantling of the current barriers to that behaviour. While McKenzie-Mohr's work is targeted at the level of the individual, we need to adopt a similar approach in terms of identifying the social, political, economic and cultural barriers which are currently blocking a more robust collective engagement with environmental issues.

In the award-winning 2006 documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?*, for example, filmmaker Chris Paine provided a compelling account of how the actions of certain corporate and government institutions helped bring about the premature and untimely demise of this technology. We are desperately in need of journalism which brings a similar investigative model to bear upon questions such as the failure of Canada to comply with its obligations under the Kyoto Accord, the institutional resistance to the implementation of a carbon pricing mechanism or the shockingly laissez-faire approach of both the federal and Alberta governments to the explosive development of the oil sands over the last decade.

In *The Geography of Hope*, one of the most insightful and inspiring books on the environment to come out of Canada in recent years, author Chris Turner invites us to take a tour of 'the world we need' by exploring how the policies, technologies and lifestyles of sustainability are already in place in diverse locations around the globe. Since September 2007, Turner has been writing a semi-regular column in *The Globe and Mail* which, together with occasional pieces from other journalists, has started to build public awareness about the many different ways in which our governments could (and should) be doing so much more to help us reduce our carbon footprint.

The current imbalance in our media between an endless supply of consumer-based, individualized solutions on the one hand and the relative scarcity of attention directed to institutional and regulatory solutions on the other must be addressed. If Canadians need to be continually reminded about the looming catastrophe (and I believe we do), equally important are more optimistic stories which describe the abundance of options available to us for dealing with the crisis. Rather than cultivate a sense of complacency about the inevitability of technological salvation, however, such journalism ought to fuel a sense of political outrage that the eminently practical solutions which are being adopted in other countries are not being enabled and pursued here.

At its best, the exploration of solutions invites the public to play an active and engaged role in making the difficult yet empowering decisions about how we should deal with the crisis. Given the reluctance of governments to consult with and take direction from the public (rather than simply interested institutional stakeholders) about what is to be done, the press could serve as a kind of democratic proxy, creating deliberative fora through which ordinary citizens could come together to participate in learning, debating *and deciding* upon a course of action.

One form this might take, for example, is bringing together a representative group of women and men to grapple with the task of how to achieve a 90% cut in the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. At the very least, watching such an exercise would give Canadians a more

realistic sense of the complexity and enormity of the task, as well as the alarming inadequacy of our current efforts. More importantly, though, it would showcase the virtues of making the public an *active partner* in the decision-making process which, after all, is the basic premise of a democratic society. It is also the only the way that the public will ever accept the real sacrifices which are required.

Once the media begins to address Canadians as empowered citizens with the responsibility and the obligation to make decisions (rather than simply watch as passive spectators while others make decisions on their behalf), our information needs will also begin to shift. We will begin to demand information about which technologies and policies and regulatory structures are most effective in making the changes we require. Which industries, regions, activities and lifestyles are most responsible for emissions? And where can emissions be cut most efficiently and with the least expense and inconvenience?

Currently, this comparative data appears relatively infrequently in news stories about climate change, leaving most relatively uninformed about (and uninterested) in the 'bigger picture' about the source of emissions in Canada. However, if we were invited to participate, either directly or in a virtual context, in national, regional, local or even household exercises in carbon budgeting, our desire and capacity to engage with this information in a meaningful fashion would surely increase.

Looking to the future, I believe the single biggest obstacle to dealing with climate change will no longer be a lack of scientific awareness or a lack of green technology or a lack of policy and regulatory options. Instead, it will be a failure to move forward in a fair, equitable and universal fashion. As individuals, as a part of communities and nations, as members of the human race, we have a tremendous capacity for empathy, cooperation, innovation and self-restraint: ultimately, these are the social resources that will allow us to address and resolve this crisis.

In the absence of fairness, however, these resources will go largely untapped. People will not change if their neighbours do not change with them; countries will not change if others do not change with them. Conversely, if individuals and societies believe that policies, regulations and lifestyle changes are being implemented in a fair and equitable fashion, the potential for transformation is without limit.

Questions of fairness and equity cannot be decided behind closed doors by a privileged few; they can only be addressed by an active and engaged public, empowered to participate in making, implementing and collectively enforcing decisions about how to achieve sustainable forms of social and economic life. Everyone must play a part in making the decisions and everyone must share the burden of change: power and wealth must neither give some a greater voice than others nor allow the few to pass necessary sacrifices on to the many.

These principles of fairness, equity and justice must come to occupy center stage in environmental journalism if we are to move from awareness to action in the years ahead.

#### References

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